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ABSTRACT

The effect of school climate on student learning was considered important by educators until the late 1960s, was discounted as a result of major research findings during the 1970s, and is now beginning to reemerge as a potentially critical factor suitable for study, according to the author of this paper. Reviewing the literature, the author notes that convictions regarding the effects of school climate prior to the late 1960s were based primarily on assumptions. Research by Coleman, Plowden, Jencks, and others in the late 1960s and early 1970s suggested that educational attainment was largely independent of students' school experiences, but the author questions the range of variables tested in these studies. Despite similar methodological criticisms, the research of Rutter et al. in the late 1970s indicates that school climate may be significant after all. Personal experiences in implementing an experimental curriculum module in two junior high schools suggested to the author that the social climate of the school, reflecting staff interaction and cooperation, has a significant impact on student morale and responsiveness. The author concludes by urging further study of the issue. (PGD)

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THE SCHOOL ORGANIZATION AND CLASSROOM INTERACTION ONCE AGAIN: SCHOOL CLIMATE

by
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For the 1982 Annual Meeting of AERA; Symposium on:
School Atmosphere, Classroom Climate, and Student Behavior

To the casual and unsophisticated observer, schools are simply places in which teachers teach and students learn. Distinctions between schools are not considered and often not even noticed. But to the people who work and play within schools--the students, teachers, administrators, and concerned parents--schools are different from one another. Indeed, a school has its own vibrations and soul; different schools express tones of feeling that are both important and distinguishable from one another.

These vibrations come from the interpersonal relationships in the school; they compose the school's "climate." Evidence of the school's climate can be seen in how learning activities are carried out, how play occurs, and how school participants interact with one another. The term climate is meant to capture the overiding social-emotional tone of the school. As such it has been difficult to study scientifically and as a result, its very importance has been doubted by the research community.

The Legacy of Doubt by Researchers

Even though school participants do experience marked differences in the climate of their schools, a number of significant and widely publicized research reports produced during the past 15 years have left a "legacy of doubt" about the importance of school climate. However, prior to the research of

EA 015 005

Coleman (1966), Plowden (1967), and Jencks (1972)--not to speak of the significant works of Arthur Jensen (1969)--few researchers in education expressed doubt about whether differences among schools were significant factors in explaining differences in student learning. Indeed, many of the reforms in education during the 50s and early 60s were built upon the assumption that the "form" of school organization as well as its climate were significantly related to learning outcomes. Thus, for example, Conant advocated the comprehensive high school, the federal government spent abundant funds to "equalize" the financial support of schools, and local schools tried organizational innovations, such as team teaching, differentiated staffing, the open classroom, the open corridor, and the like. In all of these instances, decisions to innovate in the social structure of the school were based not so much on empirical evidence as on a priori acceptance of the tenability of the assumption that differences in schools do make a difference for pupil learning and achievement.

Then came the reports from Coleman, Plowden, and Jencks et al., accompanied also by the Ford Foundation's admissions of failure after a decade of school innovation in Paul Nactigal's (1972) Ford Goes to School. All of these carried a message of doubt about the ability of the school--however organized and with whatever climate--to make a difference in student learning.

During the early 60s Coleman conducted a large-scale survey of the achievement of over 600,000 students in 4,000 schools. The results were believed to indicate that educational attainment was largely independent of the school experiences that a pupil underwent. The Coleman report was viewed as a very credible document. It carried considerable weight among policymakers. The data reported were reliable and valid, and the analyses were carefully performed. Indeed, one conclusion that low achievers possess a deep sense of

powerlessness in relation to schooling has been often cited and several times replicated. Nevertheless, some social psychologists, including myself, questioned the appropriateness of the limited range of variables that Coleman selected to evaluate schools and pupils. Notably missing were variables that described differences in school policies, structures, norms, procedures, affective environments, and level of program implementation. Still, the Coleman report carried weight and it was in line with parallel research that was being done in England.

One year after Coleman, in England, the widely read Plowden Report (1967) was published. It concluded that home influences far outweigh school variables in relation to student achievement. And, while it too suffered from limitations similar to the Coleman study, the Plowden Report took on extra weight because of its similarity in emphasis. Once more the school's programs, structures, and climate were thought to be largely irrelevant to teaching and learning.

Still more of the same occurred in 1972 when Jencks and colleagues re-assessed a large volume of statistical data from a number of investigations. Those analyses led to the startling conclusions that:

> "equalizing the quality of high schools would reduce cognitive inequality by one percent or less," and that "additional school expenditures are unlikely to increase achievement and redistribution resources will not reduce test-score inequality."

When the social scientists were asked to account for differences in student outcomes, they answered in very different ways but few saw the school's climate as being relevant. Jensen, of course, firmly proposed heredity. Coleman and Plowden turned to the family. Jencks wrote about plain luck. None placed the school even in second place. Bowles and Gintis (1976) in their Marxist critique of schooling scoffed at eugenics, family dynamics, and luck, proposing that educational inequalities are rooted in basic class subcultures

and social biases of our economy. They described how the values of societal subcultures can be learned by students in their interactions with teachers, administrators, and schoolmates, thus coming close to proposing that the school itself could make a difference in student outcomes. Still, they did not directly study linkages between school dynamics and student performances.

The Glimmer of Light by Researchers

Now, after more than a decade of doubt about the importance of the quality of life in the school for the achievement of students, we have an empirical study to support the hypothesis that school climate can make a difference. It is the work entitled Fifteen Thousand Hours by Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979). The title is the authors' estimate of the amount of time that a typical student spends in the classroom from kindergarten to the end of secondary school.

Working in the Institute of Psychiatry of London, Rutter and his colleagues intensively studied 12 secondary schools in London for three years. The students of those inner-city schools tended to be below the national average in achievement. The schools all were comprehensive, fairly formal, not alternative educational settings. The teachers typically had 5-10 years experience and the students were grouped in sets or streams. The schools were not special--they were typical big city, comprehensive high schools in England.

The principal concern in the longitudinal research design was to investigate differences between schools in terms of various measures of student behavior and attainment, and to determine in what ways the processes of the schools might influence those student outcomes.

Necessarily, the design included: first, measures of the individual students as they entered the school; second, measures of the social processes

within the school itself; third, an evaluation of the ways in which student outcomes were affected by school processes, after taking into account the effects of individual intake characteristics; and fourth, measures of particular ecological influences to determine whether they were associated with variations in student outcome, or with variations in school processes. The team's research methods included direct observations, interviews with staff and students, ability and achievement measures and the like.

A thorough summary and critique of this rich and variegated study has been published elsewhere (Exeter University, 1979). And it should certainly be noted that the study's methodology has been strongly criticized by some statisticians (not more so, however, than the large-scale statistical manipulations by Coleman, in Plowden, and by Jencks et al.). For our purposes here, let us take note of those school processes suggested in the research that may shed light on how climate influences student performance:

(1) It is important to note first that the researchers did find marked and distinct differences between schools--that is between the schools' norms, structures, and procedures. The words used in the study are the schools' "overall style, approach, aims, and ethos." We might use the word climate to summarize what is meant here.

(2) There were large differences between the schools with respect to levels of attendance, students' behavior in school, delinquency, and academic attainment--differences which still remained after controlling for the relevant neighbourhood and student intake variables. While it is true that some of the authors' statistical manipulations should be questioned, it also is apparent just from casual inspection of the numbers and of the school descriptions that significant differences among schools do exist.

(3) Physical and administrative arrangements of the schools were not associated with school processes or student outcomes.

(4) Analyses of ecological influences indicated that, although the home might have played a small part in influencing their behavior and attainments, those effects did not account for school differences in student outcome.

(5) Variations between schools in different forms of outcome for their students were reasonably stable over periods of at least three years.

(6) In general, schools performed fairly similarly on all the various measures of outcome. That is, schools which did better than average in students' behavior in school tended also to do better in terms of exam success and delinquency.

(7) The differences among the schools in outcomes were systematically related to their characteristics as human social systems. Factors as varied as the degree of academic emphasis by the staff, teacher actions in the classroom lessons, the incentives and rewards, supportive interpersonal conditions for students and the extent to which students were able to take on responsibility were all significantly associated with outcome differences between schools. And it is important to note that according to the data made available by the authors, each of the variables in the human social system of the school was open to modification by the staff through concerted action.

But, as I have indicated, all is not rosy; like Coleman, Plowden, and Jencks, Rutter and colleagues have been justly criticized for a misuse of statistics. The most detailed critique is by Cuttance (1980) who argues for misuse of statistical-significance testing partly because of small-sample size. He also states that the statistics are presented as though this is confirmation research, rather than, as they should have been, from the point of view of exploratory research. Cuttance does <u>not</u> question the validity or the reliability

of the data that were collected. I conclude that although we should not claim that school climate and student outcomes are integrally related in most schools or even in the typical school, we can be assured that they have been shown to be related in a few schools.

Personal Observations of School Climate

From recent experience, I'd like to offer a couple more examples. I have been trying out a curriculum module, entitled School Life and Organizational Psychology that a few colleagues and I developed for the American Psychological Association (Arends, Schmuck, et al. 1981). The module provides students with concepts, instruments, skills, and attitudes necessary to understand and participate constructively in the organizational life of their own school. After successful testing in 8 senior highs, we decided to assess its use in 2 junior highs. It was during my work in the 2 junior highs when I was personally confronted with the influence of staff culture on classroom interaction.

My experiences in the two schools were like night and day. In one school, the curriculum worked well; the students learned and used the concepts and skills, the teachers were enthusiastic, and the administration was very interested. We were helped greatly in making appropriate revisions for the junior high. In the other school, the curriculum hardly got off the ground, even though there were plenty of interested students who volunteered for the course, teachers who willingly collaborated with us, and an administration that very much wanted the course in the school.

In the successful school, the students worked together cooperatively and skillfully. They rather quickly began to use the communication skills, leadership behaviors, and problem-solving procedures that are presented in the

module. They unobtrusively carried out observations in the hallways, outside on the school grounds, in the lunchroom, in the teachers' lounge, and in or around the principal's office. They interviewed 3/4 of the staff about the school's organization, gathered information from parents, and implemented feedback meetings for teachers and administrators. The social studies teacher who taught the module with us was assisted by a counselor and an assistant principal, both of whom acted at times as small-group facilitators when we were understaffed. The lion's share of the faculty knew about our module and interacted with us in friendly and relaxed ways.

In the unsuccessful school, the students worked ineffectively in small groups. It took most of the term to get them to use communication skills, try leadership behaviors, and do any cooperative planning. A few students dominated the action; an informal pecking order developed early and persisted. There was very little listening; many conversations sounded like serial monologues. Some students' attention spans lasted for only a few minutes. They were uncomfortable in observing behaviors in or around the school, never dared go to the teachers' lounge or the principal's office, and complained about interviewing teachers. We hardly got off the ground in the content of the module because classroom interaction was so abysmal.

Once in exasperation the teacher asked me to facilitate the discussion of a small group that was particularly ineffective. It was a feature of the curriculum that the role of group leader was rotated from week to week. This week the leader was to be a very quiet and inattentive student, labeled by his peers as "dumb". As would be typical for him, he didn't speak up to start the meeting, to review the agenda. I waited looking intently in his direction. He fidgeted and squirmed in his chair. Another student said that I should lead the group today, but I refused saying that I thought our group leader would do just fine

after we were clear about the agenda. After another minute of uncomfortable silence he began to come out of his shell, initially by making a wisecrack but gradually with a few appropriate statements. He was not stupid! By the end of the period he was leading the group through an agenda, rather clumsily but nonetheless he was acting constructively. I was proud of his growth but not for long because a day later I was chagrined to find that he had been expelled for exploding at a teacher. His passive hostility apparently was released--at least in part by my getting him out of his shell--and the offended teacher sent him home for 2 days, complaining about the student for the next month. In our organizational psychology class, that student barely spoke again.

It was primarily through this incident that I came to realize how very different the staff cultures of the two schools were. You could feel the warmth, relaxation, and support that the teachers and administrators shared in the first school. In the formal organization, the principal established what he called "the decision-making body", a representative group of staff who co-managed the school. During my term in the school that group decided on budget cuts that would affect some departments more than others. Members of the decision-making body had their tensions and conflicts, but they also were highly communicative and collaborative. Usually their decisions were made by consensus.

Staff relations at the second school were dismal; they were tense, distant, formal, and uncomfortable. Teachers walked the halls alone. Only a few friendship groups met in the lounge; the majority of teachers stayed close to their rooms most of the day. Some teachers would have preferred to be teaching in either senior high or an elementary school. The principal had asked teachers to plan together in grade-level teams but little cooperative planning seemed to

be going on. He found staff meetings difficult. At those meetings that did occur, only a handful of teachers would speak. When the student in our organizational-psychology class was expelled, there was no serious discussion among staff. A counselor who was involved knew about the class and disagreed with the teacher, but did not intervene on behalf of the student. The principal tried to mollify the irate teacher, but demurred from explaining, as he believed, that the student's letting go offered potential for the student's growth.

I suppose that I experienced in those two staffs polar opposites of the types of schools described by Rutter et al. The key to what I saw has been presented nicely in research by Seeman and Seeman (1976). They presented quantitative data showing that students were more favorable toward school when their teachers were participating in faculty discussions, collaborative decision-making, and cooperative teamwork regarding changes in the school than they were when their teachers were less collaborative and cohesive. I believe that teachers' social competencies in working cooperatively set the psychological context for effective classroom interaction.

And so I say, once again: school climate. During the 60s we took the importance of school climate for granted even without research evidence. But in the 70s, it was more stylish to minimize the relevance of the school organization for classroom life and student learning. We took to viewing the school, moreover, as loosely coupled, putting emphasis on the autonomous teacher. We began to view the school organization as a sort of disorganized anarchy. Now with Rutter et al's observations in London coupled with those of Seeman and Seeman in Los Angeles and my own in Oregon, perhaps we should again review the

relevance of school climate for effective education. The key, I think, will be in understanding how staff interaction, particularly with reference to the quality of collaborative engagement, influences classroom interaction and student attitude toward school.

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